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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK AND PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER/GERMAIN  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: STUDENT AND ASSOCIATION VOTES SPLIT BY MARCH 14  
AND OPPOSITION

SUMMARY

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11. (U) Results of recent elections in several university student councils suggest that Lebanese society is divided between March 14 and the opposition. March 14, however, dominated recent professional association elections. The outcomes of such elections generally are predicated on local circumstances and are not necessarily an accurate prediction of national trends. Nevertheless, observers watch the results closely and both sides use victory to support claims of popular support. Moreover, a consistent set of victories for one side could boost its electoral prospects in the 2009 parliamentary elections given the Lebanese penchant for siding with winners. End summary.

STUDENT ELECTIONS SHOW SPLIT  
BETWEEN MARCH 14 AND OPPOSITION  
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12. (U) March 14 and the opposition each scored victories in several university student council elections that occurred in November. March 14 students did well in districts where the opposition won in the 2005 parliamentary elections, whereas opposition students prevailed in areas where March 14 MPs won in 2005. However, this could be a reflection of the fact that many students are not from the districts where they attend university, rather than an indication of local unhappiness with incumbent parliamentarians. The students' own votes in the general election are not seen as significant, since few have reached the minimum voting age of 21.

13. (U) On November 7, March 14 won a sweeping victory at Notre Dame University (NDU), winning 25 out of 30 seats to the opposition's five seats. Located in the pre-dominantly Christian district of Kasrawan, where Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) currently holds all five parliamentary seats, this was the first time since 2005 that the FPM lost this annual student election. Similarly, March 14 won the November elections at Lebanese American University (LAU) in both its Beirut and Jbeil campuses. In the pre-dominantly Sunni Muslim Beirut campus, March 14 won ten out of the 12 seats, and in the pre-dominantly Christian Jbeil (a district where the FPM currently holds all three parliamentary seats) campus, March 14 won eight out of the 12 student body seats.

14. (U) The opposition had successes also. Candidates associated with Michel Aoun's FPM won six out of 11 seats in the elections at Saint Joseph University, located in the Christian Beirut neighborhood of Achrafieh. The opposition (represented primarily by the FPM and Marada) won a sweeping victory in NDU's North Lebanon campus in Koura (where March 14 currently holds all three parliamentary seats).

FEARS OF POLITICAL  
STRIFE PROMPT CANCELLATION  
OF LEBANESE UNIVERSITY ELECTIONS  
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¶5. (U) At Lebanese University, the president announced the cancellation of all student council elections throughout LU campuses nationwide to avoid political tension. Both March 14 and opposition youth associations condemned the decision and called for holding the elections. In separate communiqués, Future Movement, FPM, and the Communist Party called the elections a student right and called on the president to retract his decision.

INTRA-MARCH 14 POLITICS  
PLAY INTO AMERICAN UNIVERSITY  
OF BEIRUT ELECTIONS  
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¶6. (SBU) Even at the student level, cooperation within the March 14 coalition is a problem. Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) issued a communiqué stating the PSP would not run in the November 26 elections at the prestigious American University of Beirut, but PSP students would vote for March 14 candidates. Minister of State Wael Abou Faour, complaining about the Future Movement's confessional approach to the elections, explained to Polstaff that this was to protest the Future Movement's attempt to limit the Druze community's representation based on the percentage of Druze students. He warned that, without their own candidates, PSP students might not be motivated to vote, which could hurt March 14.

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MARCH 14 DOMINATES PROFESSIONAL  
ASSOCIATION ELECTIONS  
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¶7. (U) On November 16, March 14 won three out of four seats up for election in the Beirut Bar Association. The fourth and one alternate seats went to opposition FPM and Amal candidates, respectively. March 14 also won a sweeping victory in the November 23 Dentists' Association elections.

¶8. (SBU) March 14 lost the presidency of the northern Bar Association to the opposition Marada candidate on November 2. Many observers told us that this was because majority leader Saad Hariri insisted on presenting a Christian candidate from his Future Movement, rather than someone with better local "Christian" credentials, prompting a negative reaction from Christian voters. March 14 SYG Fares Souaid dubbed this a "miscalculation" on the part of March 14.

¶9. (U) Meanwhile, Hizballah Labor Minister Mohammad Fneish postponed elections for the national teachers' union, originally scheduled for November 23, claiming voter lists had not been updated. Many observers, however, believe fear of a March 14 victory was the real reason for the postponement. The Labor Minister has authority over union elections.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (SBU) Student and professional association elections occur throughout the year in Lebanon, and political parties invest considerable time and money trying to influence them. While the results are debated intently as an indicator of national trends, in fact issues or circumstances within the association or university often are key factors. However, with parliamentary elections just over the horizon, both March 14 and the opposition will point to their victories as evidence of their popular support. Typical was March 14 stalwart MP Marwan Hamadeh's comment to Voice of Lebanon radio that the March 14 victory in Beirut bar association "reflected the upcoming Lebanese parliamentary elections." Moreover, a consistent run of victories for one side could boost its electoral prospects in the 2009 parliamentary elections, given the Lebanese

penchant for siding with winners. So far, there is no sign of such a run. End comment.

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